HISTORY This Week BONUS: Eric Foner and Henry Louis Gates Jr. on Du Bois' Black Reconstruction
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. I'm Sally Helm.

W.E.B. Du Bois was born in 1868—the year the 14th amendment made Black Americans citizens, the year Andrew Johnson narrowly dodged removal from office…and pardoned all former Confederates, including the country's leading secessionist, Jefferson Davis.

Nearly seventy years later, Du Bois would write a book called, "Black Reconstruction." It analyzes how historians–and as a result, ordinary Americans–had come to talk about the Civil War and Reconstruction. Du Bois says that the stories we tell about the past determine the lessons we take away from it. And those lessons have the power to shape the present. The book was originally published in 1935, but a new edition was released in 2021. Edited by two historians who are legends in their own right.

Today: Professor Eric Foner and Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr, also known as "Skip" ... In conversation, on W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction*.

Sally Helm: Eric Foner and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Welcome to the show.

Henry Louis Gates: Thank you very much.

Eric Foner: Yeah, nice to be here.

Sally Helm: I'm curious actually, before we sort of get into it, how did the two of you know each other?

Henry Louis Gates: Well, Eric, Eric's a legend. You know, I studied Eric's works when I was a student. So, I met Eric on the printed page.

Eric Foner: We have collaborated a lot in the last year or two talking about Reconstruction, not only Du Bois' great book, but the documentary series that Skip, was the producer of, on PBS a couple of years ago.

Henry Louis Gates: I chained myself to Eric or I chained Eric to me in order to make this documentary that we recently released on Reconstruction. And I knew that there was only one way to proceed. And that is with the collaboration of the historian of historians on Reconstruction, Eric Foner.

Sally Helm: Well so we are here to talk about the book that you mentioned. You've recently been the co-editors on this re-released edition of *Black Reconstruction* by the great Black sociologist and

historian W.E.B Dubois. And I've heard the two of you describe him as kind of almost fighting a narrative war. So, what is the narrative that Du Bois is fighting against in simple terms? And what's the narrative that he sets out to tell, how does he correct the record?

Eric Foner: The basic argument of Du Bois, number one, is in the title of the book, Black Reconstruction. That African Americans are key actors in the history of Reconstruction, rather than just being ignorant or incompetent. No. Blacks had their own agenda, their own political organizations. And they created institutions, the Black churches, schools, reconstituted families that had been broken up in slavery. They demanded full equality, political, social, economic. So, if you want to understand this period, says Du Bois, you've got to look at the Black experience, which very few historians, other than African American ones, had done.

Henry Louis Gates: One of the strongest statements of the importance of Du Bois's reconsideration of the events of Reconstruction was made by none other than Martin Luther King himself, and this is what he said: to understand why a study of "the" Reconstruction—this is like old school Black people, by the way, always talked about "the" Reconstruction— "to understand why his study of the Reconstruction was a monumental achievement, it's necessary to see it in context. White historians had for a century crudely distorted the Negro's role in the Reconstruction years. It was a conscious and deliberate manipulation of history, and the stakes were high. One generation after another of Americans were assiduously taught these falsehoods. And the collective mind of America became poisoned with racism and stunted with myths."

So, in other words, King with great insight, understood that the historiography surrounding Reconstruction was as important ironically as Reconstruction itself, because interpretations, at the sake of African Americans and assessments of their performance during Reconstruction were used as analogies, as allegories about the nature of African Americans themselves.

Sally Helm: The view of Reconstruction that King and Du Bois were fighting came out of Columbia University, where Eric Foner now teaches. In the early 20th century, a Columbia professor named William Dunning shaped this school of thought—now known as "the Dunning School." The Dunning School described Reconstruction as a period of corruption and mismanagement. A failure. And it blamed that outcome on the empowerment of Black Americans who, according to Dunning, weren't "equipped" for the responsibility that freedom brings.

Henry Louis Gates: He said look, we gave these people the right to vote. We've made them citizens. And look what they did. They blew it, they weren't ready for it. The point was to show that Black people were fit either by God, by nature, or biology to be enslaved.

Sally Helm: That was the point of things like the Dunning school, this narrative that Du Bois was fighting against?

Henry Louis Gates: Yeah, they wouldn't have said it that way. So, they needed to justify a form of neo-slavery that followed the abolition of slavery. And why did they need a form of neo-slavery? Well, cotton remained the leading export crop in the United States, and somebody needed to pick all that cotton. Right? All this free labor which had existed throughout the 19th century suddenly disappeared. Slavery was gone, but they needed to bring it back. And accompanying this was the nation's first social media war. The proliferation of all these images of Black people as venal, deracinated, promiscuous, stupid, greedy, eating watermelon, being lazy, even lynching postcards.

The number of color images within the tens of thousands of Black people with big red lips, and black, black skin, and white, white eyes, devouring red watermelon or stealing chickens or looking lasciviously at white women or whatever it might've been. And that, on the level of popular culture, was accompanied by this war over the interpretation of A) what the Civil War had been about and B) of what Reconstruction consisted and precisely during this period, again, this is the decade of the 1890s and the first decade of the 20th century, so many of those Confederate monuments were constructed to, as part of the propaganda campaign. It was diabolically genius. Genius, and to their everlasting shame, historians, people with PhDs, particularly located under William Dunning at Columbia, validated this evil rendering of Black achievement, Black accomplishment and Black being itself with the so-called sanction of academic evidence.

Eric Foner: Du Bois was not the only one, but certainly one of the most important in refuting the Dunning interpretation and putting forward a different interpretation. It's one thing to say, well, these guys are wrong, but that doesn't tell you what really happened. And Dubois was really the first scholar to put the Black experience at the center of the Reconstruction story. The first to use sources created by black people back then, whether it's speeches, letters, newspaper articles, you know, the Dunning school only was interested in white material from that period, even though they were research historians, evidence from Black people just didn't matter to them.

Henry Louis Gates: If you wonder, why in the world would at the height of the Great Depression would Du Bois choose of all things to write about Reconstruction? He was responding specifically to a book that had been published in 1929, a runaway bestseller written by a journalist named Claude Bowers, he titled this book, *The Tragic Era*. And it was another history of Reconstruction as a form of quote unquote Negro rule, which was a bad thing in which corrupt and morally degenerate African Americans demonstrated that they were unfit for freedom, much less for government. And I want to read a passage of this book: "Freedom. It meant idleness and gathering in noisy groups in the streets. Soon they were living like rats in ruined houses," This is freed Black men and women. "In miserable shacks under bridges, built with refuse lumber and the shelter of ravines and in caves of the banks of rivers. Freedom meant throwing aside all marital obligations, deserving wives and taking new ones. And in an indulgence of sexual promiscuity that soon took its toll in the victims of consumption and venereal disease. Jubilant and happy, the Negro had his dog and a gun for hunting, a few rags to cover his nakedness and a dilapidated hobble in which to sleep was in no mood to discuss work." This book was published by Houghton Mifflin right here in Boston. It was the best seller and a selection of the Literary Guild. It went through 12 subsequent hardcover printings. Now, according to Du Bois's Pulitzer Prize, winning biographer, David levering Lewis, in 1929 in response to this book, pioneering Black feminist Anna Julia Cooper wrote to Dubois, urging him to write about Reconstruction in a way that would forcefully respond to Bowers and to the Dunning school. And I love this. She said, 'thou art the man.' (laughs) And Du Bois, who was not short on ego, read that and said, 'I am the man.' (laughs) And he wrote Black Reconstruction.

Sally Helm: Yeah. You know, it's interesting. We don't get the chance that often on the podcast to stop and talk about what you're talking about, which is really historiography, right? So not just history, but the study of the way that historians talk about history. And so, what you're pointing out here is that even, right after the civil war, right after reconstruction, the reason history is being told in this way is to sort of tell this story that would allow Black people who have been freed to remain in conditions that are very similar to slavery. And then when Dubois is writing in the 1930s, right? It's like, that story is being used again to, to justify Jim Crow, right? The system of Jim Crow in the south. So, as you were quoting Dr. King himself saying it's like a really, really high stakes question, how this history is told, and it has these political consequences that continue on and

on and each moment in which this is being talked about. So, Professor Foner, what is the story that Du Bois begins to uncover and tell in his book, Black Reconstruction?

Eric Foner: Well, you know, one of the things about this book that is so remarkable is it's a very complex argument. It's difficult to summarize briefly. But one of the things that really impresses me in the book is the very first chapter. In fact, the title of the very first chapter, *The Black Worker*. Now writing in the 1930s to boys is saying Reconstruction is a matter of labor, as well as politics and citizenship. The labor of Black people growing cotton had fueled the growth of the American economy what was going to happen now that slavery was gone, what kind of labor system? So, it's not just a political debate, it's a bait over economic resources, access to land.

Remember, he's writing in the 1930s during the depths of the Great Depression. And the whole question of labor is very much at the forefront of the national agenda. And Du Bois and many, many other intellectuals, of course in the 1930s are strongly influenced by the idea that class is as important as race in analyzing the, you know, social structure of the United States. Du Bois calls the way that Black people fled the plantations, for the camps of the Union army to become free a 'general strike.' Nobody had called that, that phenomenon a general strike before. In other words, these issues are on his mind and on the mind of the country in the middle of the 1930s.

And by the end of the book, he says, you know, one of the reasons for the failure of Reconstruction is that white labor, both north and south did not see that they had the same community of interests with the former slaves. In a memorable phrase, he said they've benefited from the wages of whiteness. They might've been poor etc, but at least they were white, and they could experience supremacy, so to speak. In most sectors the better paying jobs were restricted to white people, and they didn't want to lose that privilege. So, the wages of whiteness helped to undermine the possibility of a Black/white coalition of working-class people, to push Reconstruction forward. So again, that's just one thread of the arguments running through this book. As I said before, it's a complicated book and there's a lot of arguments running through it. All of them are original in terms of the historiography and provocative in terms of how we think about that post-civil war period.

Henry Louis Gates: Absolutely. And Du Bois says that Reconstruction was the period when the former slave enjoyed this brief moment in the sun, and then retreated back into slavery. And he always zooms out. So, what happens after this brief moment in the sun? Du Bois writes, "the whole weight of America was thrown to color cast. The colored world went down before England, France, Germany, Russia, Italy, and America." Remember the European powers carved up Africa like it was a pizza pie and, you know, decided that they owned it and could exploit its material wealth. Du Bois continues, a new slavery arose. The upward moving of white labor was betrayed into wars for profit based on color cast. Democracy died, save in the hearts of Black folks. Eric, correct me if I'm wrong, but he's one of the first people to see the causes of World War I in terms of the color line, in terms of the competition of European powers to exploit the resources on the African continent.

Eric Foner: Oh yeah, of course. You're right. You're definitely right about that Skip, and popping up again and again in the book is this question, which you were just mentioning of empire, really. The failure or the overthrow or whatever you want to call it of Reconstruction reinforces the kind of racism that Skip was talking about earlier in our discussion here. And that becomes part of the legitimation of white supremacy throughout the world. The idea that Reconstruction had failed because of the incapacity of Black people became a justification for the white Australia policy, for apartheid in South Africa. In other words, imperialism takes the failure of Reconstruction and

turns it into a lesson in what Rudyard Kipling called, "the white man's burden." What happened in Reconstruction shows you that that nonwhite people are incapable of ruling over themselves and therefore the more advanced Europeans and Americans, white Americans anyway, have to do it for them. So, the failure of Reconstruction has a global impact according to Du Bois. And that certainly is a very unusual and innovative idea when he puts it forward.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Professor Gates, you've described the summer of 1867 as the first freedom summer.

Henry Louis Gates: Freedom Summer!

Sally Helm: Yeah. And there was obviously there was freedom summer during the Civil Rights Movement that people might be more familiar with, which was voter registration largely in Mississippi. But tell me about this first freedom summer 1867. What do you mean by that being a freedom summer?

Henry Louis Gates: There were four Reconstruction acts passed in 1867, 1868, and one of them black men in 10 of the 11 former Confederate states, the right to vote.

Now, we romanticize race relations in the north prior to the Civil War, but I descend from three sets of free Black people who lived in what is now West Virginia and they did not get the right to vote until 1870, three years after enslaved Black men in the former Confederacy got the right to vote because of Reconstruction Acts.

So, let's go to the summer of 1867, Black men in the former Confederacy, get the right to vote. So how did these illiterate Black men react to the right to vote? They registered to vote! 80% of all the eligible Black men in the former Confederacy registered to vote, Sally, in the summer of 1867. And in 1868, guess what? They voted. South Carolina in 1868, elected a majority Black House of Representatives, a Black Secretary of State. Black Secretary of Treasury. There were 16 Black men, two appointed to the Senate, 14 elected to the House of Representatives between 1870 and 1877. You know, Black people might have the crazy idea that they actually were entitled to be citizens, (laughs) that they were equal members of the Republic.

This was just too much. I mean, obviously it was too much for the former Confederates, but it was too much, I believe for white people in the north. This was a lot of power. We forget about how Black the South was. Until 1910, 90% of all Black people live in the former Confederacy. And South Carolina, Mississippi and Louisiana were majority Black states and Georgia, Alabama, Florida were almost majority Black states. That is an amazing concentration of power. If A) Black man registered to vote and B) if they actually vote, which they demonstrated that they were willing to do in the general election of 1868.

Black power was manifesting itself in the ballot box in a way that I don't think anybody thought would actually happen so very quickly. And this is just my own theory, but I think that that scared the bejesus out of industrialists in the north. I think it scared lots and lots and lots of people thinking, "oh my God, we never imagined that they would actually think that they could run a state." (laughs) That idea had to be crushed and crushed it was.

Sally Helm: Yeah, and I mean, you're talking about the backlash like that really won't be true on the same scale until the 1960s.

Henry Louis Gates: Oh, you know, one of the great moments of my life was, revealing to late Congressman John Lewis who I think of as Saint John Lewis his family tree. And to my surprise, John's great-great grandfather's name was Tobias Carter. And, I showed him the registration um, certificate that Tobias Carter signed with his ex in Alabama in 1867. And remember the iconic scene of John Lewis and comrades being beaten on Pettus Bridge. Why were they on Pettus Bridge? The fighting for the right to vote, which was, they would eventually get in the voting rights act.

But John looked at me and it just first of all, he had no idea that anybody in his family had actually voted and then it occurred to him, that no one had voted in his family between his great-great-grandfather Tobias Carter and John.

Sally Helm: Wow.

Henry Louis Gates: Who was given the right to vote by the voting rights act. And Sally and Eric, he looked at me, he looked down I mean, his head basically hit the table. He was weeping so, so hard. He was so moved, and he said, I guess it's just in my DNA, this passion to defend the vote, this passion to vote. I got tears of mine, myself.

Sally Helm: The last chapter of Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* is titled, "The Propaganda of History." It's required reading in Henry Louis Gates' graduate English course at Harvard.

Henry Louis Gates: This is one of the most riveting acts of historiographical analysis, when Du Bois deconstructs the major histories of Reconstruction. And Du Bois opens with a meditation on the idea of shame. "How the facts of American history have in the last half century been falsified because the nation was ashamed. The south was ashamed because it bought to perpetuate human slavery. The north was a shame because it had to call in the Black men to save the Union, abolish slavery and establish democracy. I write then," Du Bois says of his own position, "in the field devastated by passion and belief. Naturally as a Negro, I cannot do this writing without believing in the essential humanity of Negroes, in their ability to be educated, to do the work of the modern world." And then in conclusion, he says, "war, and especially civil strife, leave terrible wounds. It is the duty of humanity to heal them. It was therefore soon conceived as neither wise, nor patriotic to speak of all the causes of strikes and the terrible results to which sectional differences in the United States have led. And so, first of all, we minimized the slavery controversy, which convulsed the nation from the Missouri Compromise down to the Civil War. And then on top of that, we passed by Reconstruction with the phrase of regret or disgust."

Sally Helm: And yeah, I mean, he's talking about, or thinking about how that impacts his moment, how he sees that narrative impacting the politics of the 1930s. How do you think we still see the lasting impact of that narrative war that Du Bois is fighting, the war over the meaning of the Civil War, the meaning of Reconstruction, how do we see that impacting our own moment?

Eric Foner: Well, you know, the problem today and it's one of the reasons that we decided to work with the Library of America to re-issue Black Reconstruction, is that most people know very little about Reconstruction. So, you know, these lessons that we learned, that have been described, the

notion that there was a time when you had this vibrant interracial democracy in the South, 150 years ago more or less, it's not widely known. So, in a certain sense, the battle right now is not between, let us say the Dunning school and Du Bois, it's between ignorance and knowledge.

What you think about Reconstruction is highly relevant to what is going on in our country today about citizenship, about voting rights, about criminal justice and the police system. You know, in Reconstruction in the Memphis riot of 1866, white policemen assaulted the Black community of Memphis. Ex Confederate soldiers. You know, in other words, the idea that Black people face unusual dangers in the hands of police didn't originate uh, right now or with George Floyd, it goes all the way back to the era of Reconstruction. So that's it, the narrative war is being replaced by, as I said, a war between those who learn about Reconstruction and those who don't.

Henry Louis Gates: But the battle over interpretation that Du Bois outlines so eloquently in his final chapter, The Propaganda of History, is playing itself out too, in with all these state legislatures that are banning books. One of my books, which, Eric is just a chronology, (laughs) no agenda there, just a chronology of African American history, was just banned in Texas.

Eric Foner: That's a surefire way to get the book to be sold.

Henry Louis Gates: (laughs) The very battle over the interpretation of Reconstruction is an allegory once again, for the battle over how the story of America should be taught today.

Sally Helm: So, I guess to just bring us to the present here, this is a book that was published back in 1935. It is about the 1860s and 1870s and your new edition came out in 2021. So, I'm wondering if you could tell me as historians, what is it that makes this book so important?

Eric Foner: Du Bois raised the questions that we're still debating about Reconstruction and about our own society. Who should be a citizen? What's the relationship between economic democracy and political democracy? Who should have the right to vote? Why was Reconstruction pursued in the first place and why was it overthrown eventually? And in a certain sense, we are still debating questions that Du Bois put on our agenda, both our political agenda and our historical agenda. And that's why the book is still important. There aren't that many books published in 1935, works of history, that one could say, it's still essential to read that book, but it's remains true of Black Reconstruction in America.

Sally Helm: Thank you so much for coming on the show.

Eric Foner: You're very welcome.

Henry Louis Gates: Thank you, Sally. It was fun. I really enjoyed it.

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For more moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

The "Reconstruction" miniseries was reported and produced by Julia Press, who is here with the credits!

Julia Press: This miniseries was story edited by Mary Knauf and Jim O'Grady. Bill Moss sound designed this episode and Brian Flood provided sound design for the series. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julie Magruder, Morgan Givens, and Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

Sally Helm: Special thanks to our guests, Eric Foner and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. You can find links to their work, along with other sources that we consulted, and suggested further reading on our website: History.com/RECONSTRUCTION.

If you want to get in touch, send us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.

We'll be back on Monday with the final episode in our miniseries, Reconstruction. Thanks for listening.